

Wish upon a—planet?

By Vernon Whetstone

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“Star light, star bright; first star I see tonight; wish I may, wish I might; grant the wish I wish tonight.”

You ever say that little verse when you were growing up? When you saw the first star of the evening in the sky.

I must confess, I did upon occasion. However, the first star you see in tonight's sky won't be a star at all. It will be the planet Jupiter and I don't know about the power of planets for granting wishes.

Looking west about a half-hour after sunset the bright planet Jupiter will be located right between the horns of Taurus, the Bull.

After a spectacular three-planet conjunction later in the month with Venus and Mercury, Jupiter will leave the sky until August when it will once again pair-up with bright Venus in the morning sky.

For the first star of the evening you will need to look east a little more than halfway up the sky for Arcturus in the constellation Bootes (pronounced bow-'Oat-ees).

Look for a grouping of stars making the shape of a kite, or an ice cream cone—it will appear to be laying on its side parallel with the eastern horizon. Its brightest star is Arcturus, the fourth brightest in the night sky, and is located on the right, or western end.

Bootes has several identities, one is that of a herdsman, another is a plowman, but the most common is that of the Bear Herder since it follows the two celestial bears—the Big and Little Dippers—across the sky.

One method for locating Arcturus is to find our old friend the Big Dipper and follow the arc in the handle letting it lead you as you “arc to Arcturus.”

There are no deep sky objects in Bootees because when you look in that direction you are looking out of our Milky Way Galaxy, away from the central bulge.

If you are a die-hard meteor shower observer, set your alarm clock so you will be outside at your favorite dark-sky place by 3 a.m. Sunday morning, May 5, when the Eta Aquarid meteor shower will peak.

Meteors from the shower itself are visible between April 19, and May 28, but the peak—when the most meteors-per-hour will be seen—is the evening of May 4 and morning of May 5.

There will only be a couple of hours of observing time before the rising Sun begins to wash out the eastern sky. Normally, at its peak the Eta Aquarids can produce upwards of 55 meteor streaks per hour, however, since the radiant in the constellation Aquarius is so low on the horizon, that number will be reduced to about 15 to 20 per hour.

This shower is produced when Earth passes through the stream of left-over bits of Halley's Comet. Each streak is a bit of sand or gravel sized matter blown off the comet when it rounds the Sun.

SKY WATCH: Third-quarter moon tomorrow night (Thursday, May 2).

NEXT WEEK: The bend in the Big Dipper's handle and more astronomical blather.